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ABSTRACT

The public school principal plays a vital role in both school integration and school-community relations. Yet as school integration has progressed, the number of black principals has sharply decreased. A recent study has found several relevant conditions--that: (1) the more nearly a school approaches an equal black/white ratio of students, the more likely the principal is to consult school groups as his primary reference groups for change; (2) black subgroups are more likely to achieve equal status with white subgroups in the principal's cognizance of their needs and goals in the school that is composed of no more than 65 percent white students; (3) the principal of the school that has at least a five percent racial mixture is more sensitive to the mood of the school than the principal of a predominantly black or white school; he is most likely to develop his own sensitivity to the tenor of the school at the nearly equal black/white ratio; and, (4) principals of schools with a racial mixture of between five and 65 percent white are more likely to be involved in major system-wide decisions than any other principals, especially in major systemwide decisions directly related to desegregation than other principals. (Author/JM)

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BLACK PRINCIPALS:

Vanishing Americans or Out-Flanked Agents?

NCRIEEO TIPSHEET #7

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"Mondale Committee" records point to a national trend which should alarm the dedicated educator and delight the bigot. The testimony drives any reasonable observer to the inescapable conclusion that Black school principals have been decimated in the withering crossfires of the desegregation process. Stripped of the emotion and rhetoric of concerned educators who appeared as witnesses, the message is clear: Black principals are being removed from many school systems at a time when they are most needed.

At no time in history have principals been more important, nor have good ones been in such short supply. Never has it been more important to have qualified minority representation strongly present in this key rank in the education hierarchy. Public school systems are being pressed more than ever to use all the competent educational manpower available. Yet, this is the era in which principals who happen to be black are being inexorably pushed toward extinction because they are black.

Arguments for fairness, common sense, maximum use of available resources, or political caution are being set aside for the moment. They have been of little avail. For the statistics afficionado who disdains the soft appeal, a sampling of representative numbers drawn from the "Mondale Committee Hearing Testimony" begins to tell the stark and brutal story and point to a deep national malaise:

> Texas--More than 600 black principals in Texas lost their positions during the school years 1964-65 and 1970-71. This calculation is based upon the number of Black schools closed and the general practice of appointing white principals to integrated schools.
>
> Virginia--In 1964, there were 107 black secondary principals. Expert witnesses testified there were only 16 in 1970.
>
> Delaware--Black principals decreased from 50 to 12 within a ten-year period. Nine of the twelve were found in Wilmington.
>
> West Virginia--In 1954, there were approximately 271 black professionals (the category includes black principals). In 1970, there were 71.
>
> Kentucky--In 1954, there were 350 black principals. In 1970, there were 36.
>
> Arkansas--In 1954-55, there were 124 black secondary principals. In 1963-64, there were 134. In 1970-71, there were only 14 black secondary principals in the state.

Northern liberals and chronic critics of the South need not smirk. Black principals are not finding elysium north of the Mason Dixon, or west of the Rockies, or in New England. No where. The numbers are quite representative and reflective of national resistance to black principals. Some regions are merely more subtle in the packaging of reports and numbers.

As an example of the northern solution, look at Newark. Until 1967, there were no black principals in Newark, New Jersey. Then came swelling Black consciousness, then a black mayor. Amidst a plague of economic and political problems, Newark now has more than twenty black principals. It is remarkable that none could be found earlier. The pupil population was 75 percent black. Is this merely a reflection of political powerlessness? Whatever racial group is in control hires its own. What are the implications of this? The shade of the spectre of racial polarization is ever-present; yet we must remember that state systems exert a major control and behind the state departments of education stands the federal establishment. These two forces are and will continue to be largely white.

The picture is particularly unhealthy and unfortunate because the principal is a key administrator in any school system. The contemporary principal is in a very real sense crucial to the process of improving education in general and vital in any reorganization of schools for better quality and the equalization of educational opportunity to meet contemporary demands. The need to retain and use all of the capable ones is obvious.

Chesler and Erenberg, among others, point out the vital roles a principal must fill in a desegregated setting. In doing so, they say something applicable to principals everywhere and sound a warning:

> "Though many complex factors spell the difference between the desegregated school and the integrated school, one is dominant. The integrated school will invariably have an able and dedicated principal who is committed to the ideals of quality interracial education.
>
> "To reach his ideals, this principal serves in a variety of roles before, during, and after the actual mixing of the races in his school--and these roles...because of their importance.... We can conveniently identify five of them:
>
> - ▶Leader and organizer of staff
> - ▶Advocate of students
> - ▶Catalyst in the community
> - ▶Change agent in the district
> - Setter of the example
>
> These are essentially the same roles played by any principal in any school, you'll note. But when a high school integrates, the script is different, the part much more difficult...."

Purges--re-evaluations, dismissals, demotions, degrading transfers, ceremonial promotions, community relations assignments, and such activities which result in the decline in the numbers of operating black principals seem to generate from a few closely related cancerous points of view. Here is a sampling of the pogrom supporters:

1. Fewer principals are needed so the best should be retained and the others removed one way or another. Blacks are unlikely to be the best, therefore their individual suffering is a necessary cost of desegregation and quality education.

One might seriously consider such reasoning if those black principals displaced were replaced in each instance by extraordinary and ideal models of the profession. One would have to forget also that the replaced blacks had somehow met the hiring and retention criteria in the past. Unfortunately they currently meet purge criteria because they are black.

2. The black principal is relatively untrained and furthermore only experienced in administering ineffective, undermanned, and relatively underequipped and out-of-date schools. As we improve the school, we must improve the principal.

A school system power broker sharpening the knife to sever a black principal might well look past blackness and reflect on this. A campaign-hardened black veteran or a properly tinted neophyte new to the crucible? One who, although black, has achieved expertise in survival and crisis administration, or one who primarily meets the politic of the moment? And why were the black principals' schools undermanned, underequipped, and out-of-date? How ineffective was education under black principals?

3. The desegregated schools will usually have more white than black pupils. The majority of the pupils should be able to identify significantly with this top man on the scene. (Note: "Top man on the scene".) Predominantly white communities cannot properly respond to, cooperate with, and accept a black principal. Where there is no open black vs white conflict, the principal must be white.

This can only mean that race is more important than skill, dedication, or competence, to a community. What genuine community leader can honestly or openly subscribe to this? A quote from a letter written by Samuel B. Ethridge, Executive Secretary, National Education Association, to Senator Walter F. Mondale, dated June 16, 1971, helps illuminate this area. From a ganglia of themes poisoned by innuendo, he draws one sharp picture. Ethridge also helps identify our children as the ultimate victims, if the black principal goes the way of the Dodo.

"The real reason why so many people have problems understanding the full dimension of the loss is that they tend to think of the white high school principal and the black high school principal as simply two employees for a job.

"The black principal in most Southern communities is the highest public official in the county. His status in the black community is relatively much more important than his counterpart in the white community.

"Obviously, this is an argument for "role" models. The question often arises about the white child's need for role models. The answer using my thesis is just as obvious. The white child has many models--the judges, county commissioners, the mayor, the governor, congressmen, the President, etc.

A N N O U N C E M E N T

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"This fact was touched upon lightly in the written testimony, but it was not underscored in this precise language. The black principal is the Highest Public Official. To downgrade him is to downgrade the black community, to destroy the hope and inspiration level of the very youngsters whom the Congress and the Court intend to help."

4. Blacks are acceptable in matters related specifically to blackness only. The desegregated school is more general. There is no general need for black principals; in mixed situations where there is a special human relations need, blacks can fill vice-principal and other second step positions.

Again, this means education and school systems are keyed to race. What then is our primary national agony other than variations of this psychosubliminal disease. To say that principals should be hired or fired on such a basis is madness at best. To develop a professional educator with special and rare skills and then assign on the basis of such iron-heel-theory is criminal.

5. The community the school serves should determine the racial identity of the principal. The power in the community must, should and does determine such things.

Who? What? Is there power in every community capable of determining everything? No. Anything? Of course there is power--somewhere. A poor community is often poor precisely because the effective powers operating within it are based outside its geographic, political, or social boundaries. Unfortunately, also, power often takes precedence over reason and the spirit of the law--and more easily so when confronted by weak will and lack of commitment to either professional excellence or basic fairness. Among the living are those who remember too, some communities have supported lynchings, actual and spiritual.

This point of view alone might lead to virtual extinction of black principals. Much later, and not too much later at that, it may also account for the demise of black curriculum administrators, then black guidance specialists, then personnel workers and clericals who happen to be black. Pursued further, such a notion may result in the disappearance of black custodians--floor sweepers are unionized and better paid now. Later at this altar, zealots will surely be able to see the wisdom of fitting annoying non-black minority colleagues into removal programs springing from this line of thought.

6. Black principals are likely to cause trouble. They have caused trouble. They are automatically advocates of black nationalism and are a devisive factor in terms of true Americanism. They favor their own and are not capable of good administration.

The opinions of black militants inclined to view the black principal as an Uncle Tom cooperating with "whitey" controlled institutions of oppression and "brain-washing" might well be tuned in at such a point. If this indictment is true and black principals are indeed a class of "house niggers", why get rid of them. They are dangerous and cause trouble? How could a good nigger cause trouble? Silly argument--or is it stupid?

These inter-locking rationalizations of black principal removal programs do not adequately explain or support a counter-productive trend detrimental to both institutions and individuals. Further, if the black principal is reduced to the rare species status, how will the numbers of Chicano, Indian, and Puerto Rican principals ever increase? How will other smaller minorities survive at all? Proof that the education establishment and allied racial purists can successfully purge any echelon of our school systems for anything other than lack of competence or irrelevance is a depressing danger signal.

Martha Turnage, in "The Public School Principal as the Change Agent in the Desegregation/Integration Process," after probing from many angles, lists nine findings relevant to black principal purges in the making. Several are surprising. The entire study should be mandatory reading for local school boards:

(1) The rural and metropolitan principals are more aggressive in social change than the suburban, small town or small city principals.

(2) The most favorable response to desegregation has been from the suburban communities, and from those schools with less than five percent black students enrolled. The most unfavorable has been from metropolitan areas, and from predominantly black schools (those with less than five percent white students enrolled.)

(3) The principal of the nearly equal black/white ratio school is more optimistic about the future of desegregation than at any other level of racial mixture. On the other hand, the principal of the suburban school is the most pessimistic.

(4) The more nearly a school approaches an equal black/white ratio of students, the more likely the principal is to consult school groups as his primary reference groups for change.

(5) Black subgroups are more likely to achieve equal status with white subgroups

in the principal's cognizance of their needs and goals in the school that is composed of no more than sixty-five percent white students.

(6) The principal of the school that has at least a five percent racial mixture is more sensitive to the mood of the school than the principal of a predominantly black or white school; he is most likely to develop his own sensitivity to the tenor of the school at the nearly equal black/white ratio.

(7) Principals of schools in districts in which Federal funds have been cut off for non-compliance, or those districts under Court Order, are more likely to be a part of the informal organization of the system and used as consultants on policy decision by the administrative hierarchy.

(8) Principals of schools with a racial mixture of between five and sixty-five percent white are more likely to be involved in major system-wide decisions than any other principals.

(9) Principals of these same schools are more likely to have participated in major systemwide decisions directly related to desegregation than other principals.

Caution. It must never be said, imagined, or thought, that black principals are the only ones capable of administering an integrated school. Such an idea is crass and callously unfair to the thousands of excellent principals of other ethnic identification. There are undoubtedly many incompetent black principals, just as there are many good-for-nothing white principals. The fact is, the making of a principal of any ethnic background is no easy task. This creature is developed by school systems in an interaction with an unusual individual. All principals struggle through a bramble of education, training, hard-won experience, and pure happenstance. Black principals in addition must overcome sophisticated patterns of discrimination and manage the multi-world living required of blacks in such positions. They must often endure the suspicions of several communities, the white, the black, the poor, the powerless, the enraged. They must overcome many personal, racial and personality dilemmas. If nothing more, black principals displaced represent a rich reservoir of strength and toughness needed to make American education a better service to the public and the republic.

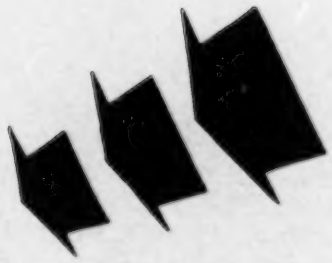
Perhaps there is a primordial bureaucratic fear of principals in general and black ones in particular. Many may indeed be staunch defenders of the status quo or dangerous change agents. Most obviously avoid either extreme. It is not evident that many of them leap blindly to any direction. Fear that they will indeed move to extreme positions should not determine selection or justify removal. A good principal is inescapably involved in the education of children and in school administration at a gut level. Poor ones encyst themselves in paperwork and surround themselves with swivel-chair zombies for added protection. The live ones cannot avoid being drawn into the minor whirlwinds of contention: separation vs integration, conservatism vs liberalism, community control vs institution experts in control, unionism vs missionary zeal, accountability demands or non-monitoring public trust, free school vs directed, and on and on and on--ask any working principal--black or white.

Many conclusions may be reached to explain the trend toward elimination of black principals. Turnage, in her conclusion, makes a comment which may well point to the most general, and unfortunate, rationale for the demise of the melano phase of this important species. She says:

"The conclusion to be drawn from these data is that the more nearly a school approaches an equal black/white ratio of students, the more problem-solving is forced to take place as close as possible to the level of operational consequences of policy enactment. (The level of operational consequences is at the point of primary sources of information of these consequences.) This places the principal and the school groups, including students and faculty, in new positions of power in the public school system. Because the individual school is 'where the action is,' desegregation will eventually result in a lessening of the power of the superintendent and the school board, and increase the change agent position of the principal."

Is there an explanation for this phenomenon that ties all the tautologies together? No. Perhaps we need only answer one question and one reality. Are "they"--meaning "we," afraid of the black principals? Is "black" in this area so fearful or is it the "principal" that is the monster? Perhaps it is somewhat like the reaction to "Black Power." To many, Black is at least survivable. Power is fine to use, but "Black Power"? What horror is this!! "Black" in education is similarly survivable, being not necessarily contagious--but "Black Principal"?

Wendell J. Roye



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